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AUTHOR Gerlock, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

The Tennessee Early Intervention Network for Children with Handicaps (TEINCH) examined problems in the transition from early childhood to elementary school programs. Surveys of administrators from public schools and preschools revealed helpful strategies (such as encouraging both preschool and school personnel to attend the child's individual educational plan (IEP) meetings and visits to possible school placements), as well as areas in need of change (such as better communication and coordination between public school and preschool personnel and more parent education). TEINCH obtained materials from demonstration projects across the country which have developed models for good transition practices. Brief summaries are offered, along with information from a TEINCH brochure containing checklists for administrators, sending and receiving teachers, and parents. (CL)

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Children with Handicaps

Transition from Preschool to School Programs

by

Elizabeth Gerlock
Director of Agency Services
Clover Bottom Developmental Center
275 Stewarts Ferry Pike
Nashville, Tennessee 37214

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Paper presented at the Meeting of the National Association of Social Workers (1985)

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Children with Handicaps: Transition from
Preschool to School Programs

Well-defined procedures for coordinating a handicapped preschool child's move from an early intervention program to a school program assist the child's and family's adjustment to the new environment and the child's uninterrupted educational development. A child's entrance into the academic world at either the kindergarten or first grade level is a major milestone in the life of any family. For the family with a child who is handicapped this period may be a period that underscores and reawakens the pain they felt when they learned their child was disabled. Their child may not be able to proceed as expected through this traditional rite of passage. Their hopes that their child would "catch-up" in the early intervention program may be destroyed. If the child has not been in an early intervention program, going to school may be the first time parents have had to admit the extent of their child's problems.

Adding to the difficulties of this period is the failure of many preschool early intervention programs and schools to coordinate with each other. Preschool programs offer a nurturing environment for children with special services for parents, but they may pay insufficient attention to assessing the environment children will move to and preparing children for that environment. They also may not educate parents as to available options and the parents' role in transition. Schools have dedicated professionals who strive to provide a free appropriate education for all in accordance with PL94-142. However, they may pay too little attention to finding out what children have learned in preschool programs, teaching methods used, and successful strategies preschool teachers have discovered for working with children. Follow-up conferences between teachers may be non-existent.

Families of normally developing children usually receive clear instructions regarding where these children will attend school, times and dates for enrollment, transportation arrangements, and what information is needed. Parents of children with handicaps often face confusion as to where their child can go to school, transportation arrangements, and what the necessary procedures are.

Experts in the field of early childhood special education agree that a carefully planned transition is crucial for a child to maintain the gains acquired in an early childhood program,[1] but in actual practice good procedures are seldom employed. A committee of the Tennessee Early Intervention Network for Children with Handicaps (TEINCH) decided to study the problem in Tennessee, explore practices and recommendations from programs and professionals who had focused on the issue, and formulate a set of practices which would insure a smooth transition for preschool children with handicaps from preschool to school programs. The Network is composed of professionals and other interested persons from a variety of agencies and disciplines who identify problems in the provision of early intervention services in the state and seek to develop strategies to overcome these problems.

TRANSITION COMMITTEE.

Members of the Transition Committee include two teachers in early intervention programs, a special education teacher, both a preschool and a school social worker, three Head Start handicap services coordinators, a director of an advocacy agency, a principal of a public school serving children with handicaps, an outreach worker, and a preschool training coordinator. Committee activities were done in addition to their regular work responsibilities. The committee conducted two surveys which included 37 preschool programs and 20 administrators from both the preschool and the public school. Open-ended questions were used with space to fill in the blanks. The committee also gained information by discussing problems and

and ways to provide a smooth transition in small groups at Network meetings.

SURVEY RESULTS.

The preschool professionals were asked, "What are you doing that you find particularly helpful when (or before) children move from your program to the public school?" Most frequently mentioned (15 responses) was the multidisciplinary team (M-team) meeting for developing the child's individual educational plan (IEP) attended by both preschool and school personnel as well as parents. One response mentioned inviting the local education agency to participate in developing the preschool child's I.E.P. the year before the child was ready to move into public school. The others referred to the M-team meeting when placement for a child was determined, and the child was ready to move into the school system.

The second most often listed strategy (9 responses) were visits to possible school placements. Parents visiting the school was mentioned most often, but one person recommended that children and preschool staff visit along with parents. One questionnaire discussed having school personnel observe the child in the preschool program.

Transfer of records, timely notification of schools regarding preschool children who would need special services, and special conferences between preschool and school personnel to share information about children who were moving from preschool to school programs were all listed on six responses.

Establishing good working relationships with the school system was a priority on five questionnaires. Contact between preschool and school teachers to share information and provide follow-up was listed four times. Providing parents with information about services available and parent rights were each cited three times. Less frequently given responses were as follows: parent meetings to provide transition information, establishing and clarifying transition procedures, having a representative from the school system on the preschool board of directors, providing preschool

children with readiness activities and mainstreaming opportunities, making sure children had needed assessments. These were all listed on two questionnaires. Listed once were having school teachers meet children and families in the child's home, providing information about financial resources for school, and helping parents work out transportation arrangements.

Another question the committee asked was, "What would you like to change about the way transition is now handled in your community?" Better communication and coordination with public school personnel was the most frequent response given. Three responses mentioned difficulty with confidentiality and poor procedures for securing parental permission. More involvement of the public school in earlier planning for children who would eventually enter public school and also planning for transition was felt to be needed. One response stated, "We have yet to develop a good relationship with the county school system. Would like to do so."

More parent education as to their rights, the M-team and IEP process, and options available in the school was listed by three people as a need. One response asked that school personnel be more supportive, "Many parents have enjoyed good support and personal contact with staff and other parents in preschool programs--our introduction to a large, impersonal school system can be quite a shock. School personnel could often be more sensitive and helpful regarding this dimension of transition."

Letting parents know as far ahead as possible where children will be going to school, special services, and transportation arrangements is the way three respondents would like things changed in their community. Another asks for more information about PL94-142 since a discrepancy exists between the preschool staff's understanding of the law and what the school system understands. More consideration for the educational needs of children instead of fitting them into available programs and a program to handle multiply-handicapped children were changes two people

would like to see in their communities. Preschool staff would also like to see inservice for students, administrators, and teachers who will be receiving the preschool children with disabilities including the regular education teachers as well as the special education teachers.

The public school administrators, social workers, and special education consultants and supervisors pointed out some problems in how preschool programs were handling transition. They stressed the need for preschools to give them enough warning ahead of time about children with handicaps who would be coming to school. One response stated, "Sending teachers need to understand schools programs and their goals. Parents need to be aware of differences in the preschool program and the school program."

Three public school respondents alluded to or discussed at length the problem of preschools presenting a negative picture of the public school. One director of education for the handicapped and gifted wrote, ". . .unfortuantely sending agencies have sometimes taught parents to believe that they will have to fight for their children's rights in public school. So, parents sometimes come to us with a very defensive attitude. My first job is to try to develop trust with the parents and to make sure they understand their child's rights and our responsibility in relation to those rights."

Echoing the concern expressed by a preschool staff member regarding differences in understanding PL94-142, a public school special education consultant stated, ". . .many agencies and parents believe that they can request and must receive specific services, schools, programs, and/or teachers. . .Services are provided according to need, not the wishes of others. Basically, services are provided to children with handicaps, not adults with special desires." The same person found that lack of

appropriate measures or procedures to identify handicapping conditions caused problems in transition.

Public school personnel stressed the need for communication, coordination, trust, cooperation, visits to new settings by parents and children, development of relationships between preschool and public school staff, and children being adequately prepared by preschool teachers. One supervisor of special education stated that providing program personnel time for transition procedures would "help eliminate many problems, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding." Clearly problems exist in Tennessee in regard to the way preschool staff which serve children with handicaps, public school staff, and parents communicate and cooperate with each other regarding children's move from preschool to school programs.

PRESCHOOL ANALYSIS PROJECT.

The Preschool Analysis Project has done an extensive survey of 166 preschool programs that serve children with handicaps in Tennessee examining practices in 10 components of the programs.[2] Transition is the tenth components the project analyzed. They defined transition as". . .preparing the family and the child to move to a new program, assisting in finding the appropriate placement, and remaining in contact with the family and the program's personnel after the change over."

They found that 90% of the respondents assist parents in finding appropriate placements, but only 59% assign a specific person to assist the family with the transition. Of the programs surveyed 56% do not arrange for the child to attend the new class on a trial basis; and 38% do not encourage the prospective teacher to observe the child in the current program. The Preschool Analysis Project further reports that follow-up/liaison activities are done the least comprehensively of all the transition activities. One-third to more than one-half of programs do not implement follow-up at all. These activities include continued formal and informal

communication between the former and present teachers; complete systematic, written records at scheduled intervals; participation in formal meetings of involved personnel concerning the child's progress, and ongoing liaison services. Readiness training activities were the ones most often implemented.

TRANSITION PROJECTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

Recognizing the need for improvement in transition services for preschool children with handicaps, Special Education Services, United States Department of Education, and other agencies have funded projects across the country to develop models for good transition practices. The Tennessee Early Intervention Network for Children with Handicaps (TEINCH) Transition Committee corresponded with many of these programs and collected materials they have developed.

In Houston, Texas, Project Transition developed and field tested a Parent Notebook.[3] This notebook provides information and plans for a series of five parent meetings to prepare families for their child's move from preschool programs to school programs.

At the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington, the Single Portal Intake Project and the Regional Interagency Center have developed a systematic set of procedures to ensure a child's smooth transition including suggested timelines.[4]

Susan Fowler and Stan Paine have a paper on transition distributed through the University of Kansas Early Childhood Institute.[5] Susan Fowler also has a published chapter on transition.[6] The emphasis is on the classroom adjustment of children with behavior or learning problems. While some of these children's problems may have improved considerably in the special preschool classrooms, gains will be lost unless the children are taught the skills they will need in the next classroom, both classrooms

cooperate in planning for the move, and both classrooms continue contact during the children's adjustment to the new classroom. The emphasis in the two papers is on children who move to a mainstreamed setting.

Project TIMMI, Petersburg, Virginia, report on an evaluation of their transition model prepared for them by the Evaluation Research Center, School of Education, University of Virginia.[7] Twenty transition activities were carried out as a result of the needs assessment of the community regarding problems with transition. The evaluation showed considerable improvement in parents, teachers, and supervisor's satisfaction with the way the transition occurred over the previous year before the activities were implemented. Moreover, the Project noted their satisfaction with their model for attacking the transition problem in their community using a process and problem-solving approach.

A central location has been established for the collection and distribution of transition information and materials from across the country. It is Joicey Hurth, TADS, Suite 500 NCNB Plaza, Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514.

TRANSITION BROCHURE.

In order to increase awareness in Tennessee of good transition practices, the TEINCH Transition Committee applied for and received a small grant to develop and print a brochure. The brochure contains checklists for administrators, sending teachers, receiving teachers, and parents. With the assistance of several Tennessee State Departments and other agencies, 3800 copies of the brochure were printed and distributed.

The checklists and accompanying comments are included below.

ADMINISTRATORS.

Both preschool and school administrators have the responsibility to set a tone of cooperation and willingness to work together. They have the responsibility for making sure that procedures are established which will coordinate the efforts of all those who are seeking to provide needed services for children with handicaps and their families.

SUGGESTED CHECKLIST FOR ADMINISTRATORS.

___ Make sure child-find is ongoing.

___ Share information about children who are ready to move on as early as possible.

___ Designate a contact person to handle transition.

___ Provide release time for teachers to visit preschool or school programs.

___ Provide teachers with time for follow-up contacts.

___ Be sure parents and teachers are in touch with each other and are receiving all necessary information. Keep information flowing.

___ Share services and materials between preschools and schools as appropriate.

___ Set up staffings or M-team meetings. Include sending and receiving teachers.

___ Provide parents with information about their children's rights and their rights.

___ Follow state regulations in accordance with P.L. 94-142 in placing children.

___ Provide parents with a list of information that the school needs about their children.

___ Provide parents with training opportunities on how to be involved in school and how to express concerns.

___ Learn about the preschool or school programs in the community.

___ Be sure children have appropriate diagnostic tests and assessments of progress to ensure placement and continued progress.

___ Whenever possible, provide placement and programming options for children and families.

SENDING TEACHERS.

Sending teachers have had the opportunity to learn about children's learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, and what support services are needed. They have had opportunities to establish rapport with parents and develop an understanding of their needs and concerns. They can help prepare both children and parents for moving on.

SUGGESTED CHECKLIST FOR SENDING TEACHERS.

___ Keep good records of evaluations, child progress, and successful teaching strategies.

___ Visit school classrooms.

___ Teach children social, self-help, and group skills that they will need in the next environment.

___ Provide the school with information about children who will be coming.

___ Get parents to sign release of information forms for information to be sent to schools.

___ Provide parents with a copy of school records and encourage them to keep a notebook or file.

___ Meet informally with receiving teachers.

___ Support and document requests made to the school for services.

___ Help determine the most appropriate and least restrictive placement.

___ Provide reassurance, support, and guidance for families and children.

___ Complete a short information form to provide receiving teachers with pertinent information as soon as the children's new placements are determined.

___ Convey a positive attitude.

___ Remain in touch with receiving teachers during the year to provide follow-up consultation.

RECEIVING TEACHERS.

The receiving teachers help children maintain the progress they have made in the preschool and continue to develop more skills and greater independence. Through their contact with parents and sending teachers, the receiving teachers learn more about children's achievements and what problems they are experiencing. They make the transition easier by being flexible in their expectations and their plans for new students.

SUGGESTED CHECKLIST FOR RECEIVING TEACHERS.

___ Visit preschool programs to observe classroom procedures and teaching strategies and to learn about curriculum and support services.

___ Plan an open house for preschool parents and children to see the school program.

___ Get acquainted with parents of children coming to your classes before school starts with either a phone call or a visit. Find out about parents' expectations for their children.

___ Provide parents with a packet of information about the school including teacher's name, transportation arrangements, and meal arrangements.

___ Review all records on the children maintained by the preschools.

___ Attend multidisiciplinary team conferences with the sending teachers to learn about children's strengths and weaknesses. Include them in M-team meetings for the children.

___ Prepare children in a mainstreamed classroom for the child with a disability.

___ Provide emotional support and, if possible, refer parents to support groups.

___ Be flexible in planning for children and parents.

___ Continue to confer with sending teachers during the year about children's progress and problems.

___ Provide suggestions to help sending teachers prepare children for school classrooms.

___ Arrange for appropriate related services.

PARENTS.

Parents know their chilren better than anyone else does. They need a balance of caution along with optimism in planning for their children's futures. They need to learn to work with professionals, being open to diagnoses and prognoses but continuing to evaluate the information given in the light of their knowledge of their children's development.

Parents usually become experts in their knowledge about their children's disabilities. They also need to be experts in their knowledge about their children's educational rights including the provisions of Public Law 94-142, the multidisciplinary team (M-team), and their children's individual educational plan (IEP). Parents are the ones who seek a match between services available or potentially available in their community and the services their children need. When participating in staffings, parents should be confident about the contribution they have to make based on their knowledge about, concern for, and love of their children. When an educational program is not satisfactory, parents need to know how to work with the school to seek changes.

Parents also have the responsibility to balance their own needs and those of their families with the needs of their children with handicaps. In some cases they will have to evaluate suggestions for additional services for their children in terms of their overall family situations. Other parents who have children with handicaps may be able to provide support and encouragement either informally or through parent support groups. Seeking help when difficulties arise is an indication of strength, not weakness.

The checklist below will assist parents to be prepared for their children's transition from preschool to public school programs.

SUGGESTED CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS.

___ Request copies of all reports of evaluations, teachers summaries, and medical reports on your child.

___ Keep a file or notebook of all records on your child including the following:

- ___ Doctors' reports.
- ___ Teachers' reports.
- ___ Diagnostic evaluations.
- ___ Record of immunizations.

___ Ask questions about any reports you don't understand.

___ Learn about the provisions of Public Law 94-142 for your child's education including the following:

- ___ Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- ___ Multidisiciplinary team (M-team)
- ___ Related services
- ___ Least restrictive environment
- ___ Your right to refuse to sign the IEP and to call an M-team meeting.
- ___ Your right to access to your child's records.

___ Visit school programs available for your child.

___ Provide the school with records required including records of:

- ___ Physical examinations
- ___ Immunizations
- ___ Certification of specific disability from appropriate medical specialist
- ___ Records of diagnostic evaluations

___ Inform school of all previous services your child has received.

___ Make choices for your child's education based on all available information: evaluations, preschool performance, knowledge of your child, and professional advice.

___ Get to know the receiving teacher as early as possible.

___ Participate in staffings and be confident in your knowledge of your child.

___ Know how to work with the school to seek changes in your child's educational program when needed.

THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER.

School or preschool social workers may be the ideal persons in a community to take the responsibility to assess concerns regarding transition procedures and when needed help to develop better communication for coordination and cooperation between agencies. Social workers are often the persons who provide coordination between agencies and are in contact with children and families. Recognizing the importance of this period for maintaining and continuing children's progress and for avoiding unnecessary trauma for families, social workers can assist community professionals in setting aside the time needed to plan smooth transitions for children and families.

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